

MISS WILLETT¹

By BARRY BENEFIELD

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TUESDAY morning Miss Willett's intermittent little alarm-clock did its third violent song and dance by the side of her bed before she mustered enough energy to reach down and switch the silencing lever. Turning her feet out on the floor, she sat drooping on the side of the bed, holding her face in her hands. After a while, standing up, she yawned and stretched with large listlessness, and walked to the one window in her second-floor rear room.

It looked out on a double row of dingy back yards belonging to the old-style, brown-stone houses that had fallen from the high estate of private residences to the low estate of converted "light-housekeeping" apartments. Directly opposite her window, in the back yard of the house fronting northward on East Thirty-sixth Street, was a small brick building. Originally, she judged, it had been used as a stable. She wondered what it was used for now; herself a "light housekeeper," she knew that they did not often keep carriages and automobiles in their back yards.

It occurred to her that she was still in her nightgown, and that her pale-yellow hair, which she had unpinned and shaken out, was falling about her shoulders and that people might see her. What if they did? Who cared?

All at once there leaped upon the threshold of her con-

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sciousness the suspicion that some one *was* peering at her from behind the one small window in the south end of the old stable, hardly twenty feet away. The window was partly hidden by a green blind now closed but the slats were tilted open, and there was a dimly silhouetting light behind the peering figure, probably from a window or door on one of the unseen sides of the building. Miss Willett could not discern the eyes clearly, but she knew now that they were there. Well, let him rubber. She did not trouble to ask why she had said to herself "him." Shifting her eyes from the stable window, she began smoothing, as if absent-mindedly, at the wrinkles in the gown about her neck.

Miss Willett was waiting anxiously and planning. Down on Third Avenue a house was being torn down to make room for a taller building. Through the irregular gap the summer sun was raking the double line of grimy back yards with a shallow, narrow shaft of warm white light rising higher every minute. Already it rested on the east side and rear of the old stable, its upper edge cutting just under the window-sill.

"If the blackguard waits, I'll catch him with the sun," Miss Willett said savagely, straining to keep her eyes away from the window until the light should rise and enter the slats of the blind.

Over in the east a cloud slid darkly across the accomplice sun. Miss Willett shook her hair forward and began running her hands back through it, to hold the leering peeper until the revelation and the punishment. A little gray kitten came around the far corner of the stable, stepping with great daintiness through the tin cans and glass and broken furniture in the dirty yard. The big woman welcomed the little kitten; he would be a useful object upon which to attach her eyes until the proper time, and while she gathered her utmost resources to curdle her plump, kindly face in the disgusted grimace she used upon this kind of man. She had not been in department-store toilet articles ten years for nothing.

And this morning she felt that it would ease her powerfully to squelch a man.

There was no need of gaps in the serried old buildings for the young summer season to get down into these back yards. It came in through the open window, touching Miss Willett. The wind was soft, like silk, and fiery sweet, like an alcoholic toilet water. There was in it the faint fragrance of millions of flowers, like the perfume she used to sell at Pfefferbaum's for five dollars an ounce.

"I've got him!" she almost shouted to herself as the cloud slipped suddenly from across the sun. But the corners of her mouth did not draw down, and her upper lip and snub nose did not lift as if she were making desperate, but futile, efforts to avoid smelling something unspeakably evil. The brown-bearded face behind the blind, lit up for a moment, was — not what she had expected. No man's eyes had ever before looked like that at her. They were not staring; they did not leer. They had in them something akin to timidity, a fearful wistfulness, a yearning tenderness; and Miss Willett was sorry that the sun's shaft had now been blotted out by a cloud and no longer disclosed the face.

Sighing, she turned away. Pulling aside a huge-figured dust-curtain hanging across a corner of the room, she surveyed her wardrobe.

"An' not a decent dress in the lot," she summarized gloomily. "Gee! an' I ain't got no job, neither, to buy another one with."

Miss Willett had received notice the day before. For five weeks she had been earning the highest salary that had come to her in her life — twenty dollars a week as a demonstrator of Bimber's Patent Baby Bed. For five weeks, clothed in the handsome costume of a nurse (supplied by Mr. Bimber), she had stood in a show-window at Broadway and Twenty-third Street illustrating the marvelous and manifold uses of the patent baby bed, the other actor in the pantomime being a dummy baby with a celluloid head whom she called the Princess Bimberino.

According to her employer, she had not fulfilled his expectations; having learned the mechanism of the bed, she had not acted with any "ginger," she had not exhibited the hoped-for "pep." In her hands, Mr. Bimber had said the day before, when giving her notice, the Princess Bimberino was only a dummy and the patent bed only a wearisome piece of machinery out of which she had been making twenty dollars a week and through which the company had been losing two hundred dollars.

When Miss Willett reported for work at 8:45 o'clock a mob of twenty or thirty prospective demonstrators who had answered Mr. Bimber's advertisement in the morning papers were waiting out in the hall in front of the office.

"Get on your nurse's rig, Miss Willett," he said briskly, "an' do the job while I weed out that bunch. I guess you'll be free by noon all right—to look around for another job. But I'm payin' you for this week, an' your time is mine if I want it."

At nine o'clock Miss Willett stepped up on the show-window stage, ran up the curtains hiding Twenty-third Street on the one side and Madison Square Park on the other, and set herself to do the last sad lap of her twenty-dollar job. Lifting the Princess Bimberino in her arms, she noticed that the long white dress of the royal infant had lost its freshness and that some of the lace at the bottom was torn and hanging. She had not noticed the princess's dress before.

"Bless her heart!" the big woman whispered contritely, squeezing the princess hard against her breast. "Bless her heart! nobody looks after *her*. Your muzzer's goin' to make you a brand-new dress even if she is losin' her job. God knows, honey, I reckon I'll have plenty of spare time in the next few days. It's toilet articles again for mine, I reckon, at ten per; an', stars above! how I hate the things now!"

In the shifting hundreds that stopped and gazed in at Bimber's Patent Baby Bed exhibit during the morning

there were more than the usual number of women. At almost any moment an Italian or Jewish mother with a baby in her arms joined the inlooking crowd. At the conclusion of every part of the didactic pantomime, and while she was putting on the stand the black-lettered card telling the use she had just demonstrated, Miss Willett's round, gray eyes were searching hungrily through the spectators until she found one of these mothers, and then they smiled across the silent chasm of the plate-glass window in the eager, instant intimacy of common motherhood.

During a five-minute rest in the middle of the morning, holding the royal infant close up in her arms, Miss Willett turned her chair to face the Broadway side, and sat staring out at the park, just across the street. The old trees waved their young green branches at her, beckoning her to look. The multitude of flowers, banked row on row around the leaping fountain, lifted their hot faces to the kisses of the sun. The big woman leaned over suddenly and kissed the Princess Bimberino.

At 12:30 o'clock Mr. Bimber stepped up on the stage. His large, fat-padded, black eyes were shining. His stubby hands rubbed themselves together as if they were feeling already luxury within them. His little legs were strutting.

"Do you know it's a half an hour past your lunch-time, Miss Willett?" he asked, looking closely at her.

"No, sir; I never paid no 'tention to the clock to-day."

"Well, it is, Miss Willett. I'll do this here three-ring circus while you're gone."

"Must I come back?" she asked, moving slowly toward the steps. "I guess you got somebody outa that bunch, did n't you?"

"What's happened to you, Miss Willett, that's what I want to know?"

"Nothin' 's happened to me; only I've lost my job."

"Lost nothing! I sent that bunch away after fifteen minutes. I got so busy writin' orders I could n't talk to

'em. I ain't even had time to go outside there to see what you been doin' up here. What's happened, that's what I want to know? What you been doin' up here while my back was turned, hey, Miss Willett? You got 'em comin' in droves. Where'd you get all this here new ginger at, Miss Willett? Yesterday you had nothin'; to-day you got everything. I ain't had time to see it, but you must have it. What's happened to you overnight?"

"Stop your kiddin', Mr. Bimber. I ain't up to it to-day. I reckon I got to go back to toilet articles, an' I hate them things now. I done 'em ten years. An' it ain't no cinch that I can get even that job again, for it's the good old summer-time now. I'll go back to Pfefferbaum's and make a try, anyhow. I reckon you won't need me no more this afternoon?"

"Need you? You make me laugh, Miss Willett. I tell you, you've got 'em comin' in droves. I took more orders this mornin' than I've took ever since I've been here. If this here keeps up, I'll have to hire a secretary to write 'em down."

"Need you, Miss Willett! Miss Willett, your salary is raised—a dollar and a quarter a week. You see that there place acrost the street over yonder? They say it's a swell restaurant. Myself, I ain't been in it; presidents of baby-bed companies eats in dairy lunches. But you—you take this here an' have lunch on *me* to-day, Mis Willett."

"O Mr. Bimber!"

"Gimme the princess an' get out!"

As the big, bewildered, tremulous woman started out of the door, Mr. Bimber committed the terrible dramatic solecism of halting the pantomime in the middle of an act.

"Miss Willett!" he called.

"Yes, sir?"

"You take plenty of time to eat, Miss Willett. An hour for yours to-day. I guess you ain't kind o' tired, hey? Take an hour, anyhow, Miss Willett, an' if it runs

over, who cares? Not me. I'll do this here three-ring circus in some kind o' way while you're gone. Don't you come back before one-thirty, Miss Willett. Y' un'erstan' me, Miss Willett — one-thirty?"

"Yes, sir; thank you."

She ate in a dairy lunch, bought a pair of clocked silk stockings with the rest of the two-dollar bill, and sat out the last three fourths of the hour in Madison Square Park.

Quitting work at six o'clock, Miss Willett took off the Princess Bimberino's long white outer dress and tucked her carefully in the bed for the static, electrically lighted night exhibition, and came down the steps of the show-window stage holding the soiled, frazzled garment in her hands.

"What you gonna do with that thing, Miss Willett?" asked Mr. Bimber, looking up from the order-book.

"I'm goin' to patch it up some an' wash it to-night. The pore little thing looks like a tramp in this. Ain't you got but *one* dress for the princess, Mr. Bimber? She ought to have a clean dress every day, bless her heart! An' she *will* have, too, if I have to do this one up every night."

"Dozen new dresses for the Princess Bimberino to-morrow, Miss Willett. You buy 'em; I'll give you the money at lunch-time. Anything you say about the princess goes, Miss Willett; y' un'erstan' me — anything! Will you buy 'em for me, Miss Willett?"

"Sure; I'd like to."

"Good night, Miss Willett. Pleasant dreams."

Then Mr. Bimber went back inside to gloat over the day's orders.

Arrived at home, Miss Willett rushed up the one flight of stairs and burst into her room. She took off her hat, dabbed a powder rag about her nose, slicked her eyebrows straight with a moistened finger, "duded up" her hair a bit, and then straining to hold herself to casual leisurely gestures, walked to the rear window and slid

up the shade slowly. She looked out, not at the stable first; and when at last she did permit her eyes to rest hungrily on the little window, it was blinded on the inside with a dingy, blue shade.

"Gee! I knew it," sighed Miss Willett, and went back to the bed and sank down. "Nobody lives or works in that little old thing, anyhow. He just happened to be in there this mawnin' for a minute or two. I reckon it's just a lumber-room, or somethin', now. But maybe again sometime—." The big woman stirred herself energetically, and stood up, to hurry her delicatessen and gas-stove dinner. "Because I got to do the princess's dress to-night," she said to herself, as if in explanation of her haste.

Miss Willett was awake Wednesday morning before the alarm-clock on the floor by her bed had done even one violent thing. She heard it give the premonitory click to signal all its forces to make ready for the first fiendish charge upon the quiet peace and comfort of the occupant of the bed. Reaching down, she turned the lever back to the word "Silent."

"Don't, dear," she said, patting it tenderly. "It ain't needed this mawnin'."

Getting quickly out on the floor, Miss Willett stood up without stretching or yawning. Having attended carefully to her face and hair, she raised her arms above her head to make sure that the sleeves of her nightgown would slip down over them; she knew that her arms were good to look at. Maybe they were a shade too plump, but they were straight, without a loose-jointed bend-in at the elbow, and they were round and smooth and firm and long and white.

Assured that the sleeves were in perfect working order, she walked to the window, ran up the shade, and looked straight at the green blind on the rear of the old stable. The morning was gray with clouds, but she easily made out, behind the open slats, the brown-bearded face of the day before.

"Again — all right!" she said to herself, triumphantly.

Shifting her eyes from the window, she slowly raised her arms above her head as if in a waking yawn, and shook the loosened sleeves down to her shoulders. With tremendous effort she kept her eyes drifting about the back yards in the pretense of lazy, early morning indifference. When she looked back, a hand was shoving out on the window-sill a tin can containing a geranium with one red flower open. Miss Willett smiled vaguely in the direction of the window, shifted her eyes once more, and pulled down the shade.

"I wonder what them things cost?" she said to herself. "Anyhow, I got to have one."

On the way down to Twenty-third Street it occurred to Miss Willett that he might be following her. She rather wished he would trail her to the baby-bed window; Mr. Bimber's nurse's white outfit was the handsomest costume she wore. She dawdled in front of several windows, looking furtively, anxiously, back.

"Shuckin's!" she said after the third attempt, "he would n't do a thing like that — follow a lady." And she hurried on to work.

That night, though the stable window was once more dark and dead with the drawn shade, Miss Willett placed on her window-sill a small potted geranium with two open red flowers, flushing as red as they because she felt that already she was whispering to him in tones that no one else could hear. Well, anyhow, he had spoken first.

The week wore on. Mr. Bimber's enthusiasm increased as the orders kept coming in. The forelady of Pfefferbaum's "Ladies' and Misses' Dresses," an old friend of Miss Willett's, was personally supervising the alterations of "somethin' swell," for her whom the Pfefferbaum girls called "Old Toilet Articles." Every day, across the dingy back yards, the two geraniums sent secret messages to each other; and though not again that week did the sun come out from behind the clouds in

time to light the little window in the stable, yet every morning the big, blushing woman kept her tryst there with the brown beard and the tender wistful eyes. Only once, and then for but a few seconds, had the sun lighted the gloom behind the open-slatted blind; yet her imagination, given merely a glimpse of the now familiar head, always supplied the appealing attributes that had impressed her that first morning of acquaintance.

Rising as early as usual Sunday morning, Miss Willett hurried to the window. She did not know if he would be there on Sundays. Still, if he was n't a twenty-carat simp, he should have gathered that she, too, was a worker, and that therefore she would probably be free all day Sunday. And even if he was n't of the masher kind, surely he would have "pep" enough to seize her first free day. Miss Willett did not raise the shade; she merely peeped around the side of it. He was there all right, all right.

During the week, in the early morning pantomimes, Miss Willett had featured first her vague sweet smile, then her pale-yellow hair, her splendid arms, and her white neck with the dimpled depression at the base of it; and yet all so diplomatically that if for any reason she should want to draw back, she felt she could say severely and convincingly: "Who are you? I never seen you before. I don't know you. On your way; don't get fresh with *me!*"

This morning she would feature the new dress; hence the window-shade would not be raised until late, maybe nine o'clock, when she would be all ready. But she desired him to know that she was up and alert. Sticking her head around the side of the shade, she smiled across the two tiny yards, and shook her hand gaily.

At 9:15 Miss Willett still stood before the dresser-glass. The shade being down, the gas was turned on. She got out in the middle of the room, making large contortions in the endeavor to see herself from all sides. Front, back, and sides, she was the best that she could

achieve. The big, gracefully drooping hat was of a tint which would, in the open, she knew, emphasize the color of her wholesome complexion. The filmy sleeves revealed her opulent arms alluringly, and the dark-blue taffeta skirt rustled richly at her slightest movement. The low shoes, though topped with buckles set with brilliants, did not dim, but enhanced, the glory of the clocked silk stockings.

Taking a final supercritical view of her face within three inches of the mirror, Miss Willett turned off the gas, drew a chair against the window, ran the shade up briskly, and sat down, holding in her hand a book that seemed, from the manner in which she handled it, already to bore her considerably. Miss Willett's date was with Circumstance. She was ready; she was waiting.

From time to time she smiled incitingly across at the wistful, yearning, tender eyes she knew were behind the blind. Down on Third Avenue the elevated trains thundered, and in her mind she traced, a little regretfully, the glad course of the four old Pfefferbaum girls who had invited her to a Sunday in Bronx Park. If he made a move, she would suggest the park, provided he was n't dressed altogether like a rube. She was instantly ashamed of thinking of that proviso; somehow she knew he would not be tacky, no matter what he wore.

It *was* a swell day. Though the elevated trains roared on north and south as usual, though the trolley-cars rattled their loose and loosening steel bones along the steel tracks, yet the harsh, clattering, shrieking week-day noises of innumerable trucks and machines and whistles were withdrawn from the general volume of sound, and the city's mighty voice was lowered and softened to its gentler Sabbath key. The west wind, coming from across how many millions of passionate fields and forests, shook out over New York the whispering ghosts of their soft summer sighs. Up in the park Minnie and the others were already rioting with the city and June and the sun. Miss Willett, gorgeous, eager, tremulous in

the strain of suspense, sat by the window, holding a book, waiting.

At noon she dropped the book on the floor peevishly. "Gee! I wisht the simp would make *some* kind of a move. I cain't set here *all* day. My God! on week-days I'm fed up good an' plenty on show-window exhibitions."

As usual on Sundays, Miss Willett went down to a restaurant on Third Avenue for dinner. Coming out, she stopped to consider. What next? She thought she might be able to find Minnie and the others in the park, and it would be fun trying, anyhow. But already she was arguing for him.

"Yes, you knock the mashers," she said accusingly to herself, "an' then you throw a fit because he don't rush things like they do. Give him a little time, won't you? He'p him out. Them's the best kind—the kind you have to he'p some. It's a sign they ain't fresh."

So she went back to her room, sat by the window, and took up her book and waited, while the marvelous June day marched on without her.

At two o'clock Miss Willett's eyes were lounging about over the dirty back yards, as if to rest themselves after the fatigue of reading. They fell upon the little gray kitten. He came stealing around the far corner of the old stable, searching for whatever dainty adventures might come his way.

Determined to fight something and at once, he humped his back at a poor, defenseless tin can lying prostrate on the ground, sidled over to it, lashing his triple-sized tail ferociously, struck one mighty blow at the can, and ran to the fence separating the two back yards. He hesitated a moment in indecision whether to come over into foreign and fascinating, but possibly dangerous, territory; then he jumped, and so did Miss Willett. She was standing up when he reached the fence. Her plan was made.

Rushing down-stairs and through the basement apartment of the janitress, she got out in the yard. Five min-

utes later she was back in her room with the captive kitten. Setting him in the middle of her bed, she threw herself feverishly into the completion of her preparations for her tremendous adventure. It seemed to her that the kitten was a miraculous gift dropped straight down from heaven for a special purpose.

Tucking the strategic kitten under her left arm, Miss Willett walked out of the room, tiptoeing for some vague reason, locked the door, and went noiselessly down the stairs.

Every piece of jewelry that she owned was stuck on her somewhere. The fingers of her left hand were gnarled with rings. She loathed toilet articles, having had too much to do with selling them; but now she called herself a fool for not possessing any more complicated cosmetic aids than talcum powder. Still, the touch of the rings and the other jewelry, the swish of the taffeta skirt, the soft, snug feel of the silk stockings, the clinging caress of the filmy sleeves,—all these somewhat reassured her.

At 3:30 o'clock Miss Willett was around in East Thirty-sixth Street, standing fearfully in front of the leaning, dilapidated wooden gate that must open upon the passage leading back to the primitive little stable. She didn't want to ring up the janitress of his house unless she had to. She pushed the gate, and it creaked open. Slipping inside, she closed it, and walked back along the rough, irregularly paved roadway, at the end of which she saw the dull red stable, its sliding-door slightly ajar.

It was not easy to walk down the old roadway now. She wanted to drop the kitten and flee. After a moment she did stop and drop him. But he did not run away and thus deprive her of her innocent excuse for entering the stable of the red geranium. He humped his back and snuggled purring about her ankles. So she picked him up again.

And now she had either to go on or run back at once.

She could not stand there in the yard. The houses on both sides of her were filled with windows — monstrous eyes that leered and grinned at her, eyes that seemed to know every secret thought that had passed through her mind in the last five days about this man she had come to see — thoughts some of which even she herself was not definitely aware of until now. But they did not seem new; she was certain she had had them before. The door ahead of her was ajar. She went on slowly.

At the door the big, gorgeous, tremulous, flaming woman halted again, panting, crying "Shame" at herself within her heart. And yet she knew, knew absolutely, that he would not even *think* "Shame" about her. She recollected his eyes; no eyes had ever looked like that at her before. *He* would understand at the very first. Nothing else mattered.

High up in the house to her left a yearning beginner on the violin struggled in ecstatic pain with some vast, ancient, overpowering love-song. The softly moving wind from the west, slipping through the crevices of the crowding city, came stealing along the passage and waved the pale-yellow hair about her hot temples. Apparently unrelated thoughts, dimly noted, went swirling through her head: that the shouting of the children back there in Thirty-sixth Street sounded sweet in her ears; that she was thirty years old already; that the kitten lay warmly curled under her heart; that somehow the Princess Bimberino was very far away from her now.

Then she knocked, and, without waiting for an answer, stepped inside the door. Her eyes leaped to the little rear window that looked up at hers. But she was acutely aware of other things in the small house. There was a pungent odor of lime in the air. An old gray-bearded Italian lay asleep, snoring, on a bench against the wall. On shelves, on benches, on boxes, sitting around everywhere, were plaster figures of all sizes and shapes and colors. On the sill of the rear window sat the can with the one red geranium bloom. In front of it stood

the plaster figure whose face the young summer sun had lifted up to hers. Some queer feminine impulse, in the midst of her catastrophe, demanded that she notice how he was dressed—in a sheet-like garment, with a blue border, and wearing sandals. She broke into a hysterical giggle, instantly smothered with a sob.

Miss Willett's left arm relaxed, and the kitten slipped down upon the hard floor, scratching ragged furrows in her new dress as he went. The big woman, whimpering as if she were being beaten, leaned back against the door, patting at her mouth with her ring-gnarled fingers.

"O Jesus!" she whispered, pleading, holding out her arms to the plaster figure by the window—"Jesus! I did n't know! I did n't—"

And she backed out of the door, and closed it softly, and went home.

But somehow after that, Miss Willett's love for the Princess Bimberino seemed even to deepen and intensify, and there was in her handling of the veteran infant an immaculate, an almost agonized wistful tenderness which, as Mr. Bimber said, "kept 'em comin' in droves, an' with their eyes shinin'."